

Monday 1 February

(Feast in Ireland only) St Brigid • Mark 5:1-20

It is a remarkable thing to read a passage of Scripture or hear a reading at Mass. For when we do we are reading or hearing an ancient and sacred text. The Old Testament is three thousand years old, the New Testament two thousand. The writers of the New Testament knew nothing of the modern world – in their world there were no planes, no cars, no phones, no electricity, no computers or Internet, no modern medicine. So when we read today's Gospel about demon possession, we might be forgiven for thinking that we might diagnose this condition differently today. Or would we? The Church has always upheld that there is a demonic realm, that Satan and his minions are a reality. When reading the Scriptures, it is best to let the Scriptures judge us, not us judge the Scriptures.

What we can be sure of is that Mark is a reliable witness of an event that happened in Jesus' life. The deliverance or exorcism of the demon-possessed man is a powerful and striking account of a remarkable stand-off between Jesus and a realm we know little about – the demonic realm. What is fascinating about the encounter is that the demons, unlike the disciples and the crowds, know who Jesus is: they know that Jesus is God's Son.

The Church has always taught that there is a realm which we do not see but exists and is real. Paul alludes to this world when he writes, 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air' (Eph. 2:1-2 NIV). The Church has always taught of a dramatic struggle between good and evil and there is a tradition that the Archangel Lucifer rebelled against God's sovereign plan to send his Son to redeem humankind. There is then a heavenly realm opposed to God's kingdom, and these fallen beings know that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, God's only Son. In this Year of Mercy we proclaim that Jesus is Lord, the Holy One of God, who conquers evil, casts out the demons of darkness, cynicism and despair, and is the Lord of Light and Life.

Father, your intent was that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God would be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm, and that your will of salvation and redemption would be accomplished by your beloved Son.

2 Sam 15:13-14, 30; 16:5-13 • Ps 3:2-8 • Mk 5:1-20

(In Ireland only: Rom 12:3-13 • Ps 148:1-2;11-14 • Mk 3:31-35 or Lk 11:27-28)

Tuesday 2 January

Luke 2:22-40 • Presentation of the Lord (Feast of the Lord)

Today we light candles recalling Simeon's prophecy that Jesus would be a 'light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel' (v. 32). Hence the traditional name for today's feast is 'Candlemas'. Forty days after Christmas, we commemorate Mary's obedience to the Mosaic law as she entered the temple for the ritual purification, as commanded in Leviticus 12:2-8. Also, forty days was the time when a firstborn was brought to the temple to be dedicated to the Lord (Exod. 13:12-16).

The Holy Family were fulfilling obligations of the law of Moses, incumbent not on Gentiles but on Jews. They were in the temple precincts, probably in the inner courtyard of Israel where Gentiles were forbidden to tread under pain of death. The Lord suddenly comes to his temple (see Mal. 3:1). But he comes not to stay there. Nor is the plan for him to go forth from the sanctuary to enlighten just his own people. No, Jesus came to set the whole world ablaze. This Light of revelation is for all nations, for that is what 'Gentiles' means.

Jesus would later return to the temple precincts to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. On a festive autumn evening, while the temple plaza was ablaze with torches and full of Jews dancing in celebration of their special relationship with God, Jesus echoed the words of Simeon and boldly proclaimed, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12). Yes, Christ is our light. But he has ignited us with the fire of his Spirit, and he calls us 'the light of the world' (Matt. 5:14). We are not meant, any more than he was, to keep our light under the bushel basket of the home or the church. The light we have received is meant for an entire world languishing in darkness. The Presentation is a feast of mission, a reminder of the call, in this Year of Mercy, to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to a new evangelization.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the true light enlightening every person born into this world. Today, as we celebrate the feast of Candlemas, help us by your grace to be light-bearers who spread your kingdom of light, love and truth and so increase the number of those who dwell in heaven, the city of eternal light. Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4 • Psalm 23(24):7-10

NB: No second reading when celebrated on a weekday • Luke 2:22-40

Wednesday 3 February

Mark 6:1-6

Today's reading contains a sobering verse: 'He was amazed at their lack of faith' (v. 6 NIV). Mark records that the one place where Jesus was amazed by a lack of faith was his own home town – Nazareth, the place he had spent his formative years. Why was this?

It was because the people amongst whom Jesus grew up refused to see beyond what they knew and understood about him and his family. Whilst Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth, for their part they took offence at him. The comment Jesus made offers us some insight into his own village's rejection of him: 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house' (v. 4). It seems that in Jesus' case familiarity bred not only contempt but a lack of faith.

This familiarity can be at work in our lives too, sometimes without us realizing it. We attend church regularly, we receive the sacraments, we are familiar with the Scriptures and prayers, rituals and feast-days are part and parcel of our lives. It can be hard then to hear that this familiarity can create in us a certain passivity or taking for granted the faith we profess and confess. This in turn can then lead to a lack of expectation, a loss of joy and a certain cynicism taking hold, which results in a hardness of heart.

What is the remedy to this? What is the solution? How do we avoid it? Perhaps the answer lies in this Year of Mercy. Our hearts grow hard when we lose sight of God's great mercy towards us, which is poured out every moment of our lives. The elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son lost a sense of gratitude for the blessings of living in his father's house (see Luke 15:25-32). We too can lose that lively sense that we are forgiven sinners, but we can regain it by asking the Spirit to lead us into a new awareness of the depth of God's goodness and kindness. This leads to a sense of thankfulness which becomes a wellspring of joy and happiness, bubbling up within and convincing us that we are beloved children of God.

Lord, pour out your mercy like the morning dew and create in me a grateful spirit that rests in a sure knowledge of your love.

2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17 • Psalm 31(32):1-2, 5-7

Mark 6:1-6

Thursday 4 February

Mark 6:7-13

Evangelization is, if you like, the *raison d'être* of the Church's mission on earth. In other words, the Church exists to evangelize, which means that our vocation as believers is to lead others to Christ, and the reason each parish exists is to do the same. It really is as simple as that. But if it really is as simple as that, why do so many of us find it so difficult? In fact, the truth is that most of us find it virtually impossible to share our faith in a way that leads others to Christ.

Furthermore, Jesus' instructions to his disciples do not seem very helpful in our modern world. You know, they were to 'take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no money in their belts...' (v. 9). And as for shaking the dust off our feet, well, most of us don't even get through the front door to shake anything off when we leave! Let's face it, evangelizing is the one thing we'd rather not do and certainly find hard to talk about. We are much more comfortable with the idea of witnessing to love, service or just being a jolly nice chap or jolly nice lady!

How can we be joy-filled evangelists? What would happen to our lives and our parishes if we discovered that evangelizing isn't as hard or difficult as we think? We need to think differently about our calling to witness to our faith. Sharing our faith in an easy-going and confident way should be the most natural thing in the world.

The Holy Spirit is the One who changes and renews the way we think – we cannot do this for ourselves. The Spirit teaches us that the gospel meets a profound need in us all to know that we are loved and forgiven by God. When this message (the kerygma) is shared sincerely, with respect and love, it has the power to change lives. We just need to step up and step out in faith and be prepared to witness to others, explaining the reason for our hope, our joy, our confidence in God and, last but not least, our experience of God as a loving, forgiving and merciful Father.

Lord, through the grace of the Holy Spirit inflame my heart such a deep love for the gospel message that more than anything else I want to share your love and mercy with others.

1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12 • 1 Chronicles 29:10-12

Mark 6:7-13

Friday 5 February

(Memorial) St Agatha • Mark 6:14-29

When we read or hear a passage of Scripture, we should always have a sense of expectancy that the Spirit will reveal more of its secrets, its hidden depths. The Spirit is generous and lavish but we need to meet him halfway by asking the right questions. We have to take on the mantle – if the analogy doesn't offend too much – of a faith detective: probing, enquiring and even interrogating until the Scriptures confess their hidden treasures and riches.

Today's account by Mark is a case in point. To all intents and purposes it is as if Mark takes us on a detour, away from the story of Jesus to the drama of John the Baptist, recounting the tragic story of how the prophet met his end. But is it as simple as that? What happens if we scratch a little deeper and seek to uncover what Mark (and therefore the Spirit because the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God) is seeking to achieve?

Through the story of John the Baptist, Mark is preparing his readers for the cross: John's fate foreshadows that of Jesus. Let's examine the clues. Herod was wrong about John the Baptist being raised up (v. 16) but Jesus would indeed be raised up (16:6-8). In the same way that Herodias was out to destroy John the Baptist (v. 24), the chief priests conspired to kill Jesus, but they had to go about it by devious means because of the possible reaction of the people (11:18; 14:1-2). Like Herod with John, Pilate had Jesus put to death although he wasn't sure what crime Jesus had committed (15:14). Finally, as in the case of John, a follower of Jesus would take his dead body and lay it in a tomb (15:46).

John the Baptist had fulfilled his God-given commission to 'prepare the way of the Lord'. He himself had declared: 'He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease' (John 3:30). A few decades later in his letter to the Galatians Paul declared, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (2:20). Are we willing to die to self so that the risen Christ might be seen in us?

Lord, may I not glory except in the cross of Christ; I desire with all my heart to bear witness to a life of love and service through the power of God's grace poured out on me at baptism.

Ecclesiasticus 47:2-11 • Psalm 17(18):31, 47, 50, 51
Mark 6:14-29

Saturday 6 February

Mark 6:30-34 • St Paul Miki & Companions (Memorial)

Mark wants his readers to see in Jesus of Nazareth a power and grace comparable to the God of Israel who provided manna for his people when they were in exile in the desert (Exod. 16). When Jesus was filled with pity and compassion because the people who flocked to see him 'were like sheep without a shepherd' (v. 34) he was embodying the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel (Ezek. 34). Mark wants to remind his readers of God's loving presence and action in the history of Israel. God has always had a plan of salvation, and this plan has been and is continuing to be worked out in human time and space.

God cares for his people in every way – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Having had compassion on the crowd and fed them with spiritual food, Jesus now had compassion on their physical bodies and gave them physical food. He took the loaves, raised his eyes to heaven, pronounced a blessing, broke the five small loaves and gave them to his disciples to distribute; then he did the same with the two small fish (v. 41). Five thousand people were fed: the people all 'ate and were satisfied' (v. 42). No one went away hungry that day. This miracle of the distribution of the loaves and fishes was a prelude to a greater miracle – the miracle of the Eucharist which we receive whenever we attend Mass. The Eucharist is the very source and summit of our faith, and in it and through it we are nourished and fed – our souls are satisfied.

The word 'eucharist' comes from the Greek eucharistein, meaning literally to give thanks, and recalls the Jewish blessing in which God's work of creation, redemption and sanctification is praised. Our hearts sing with joy and praise when we consider the great gift we have received in the Eucharist – the Bread of Life, feeding our souls. The Eucharist is a remarkable and wonderful institution which we are so blessed and privileged to receive. Day after day all over the world the Eucharist feeds millions upon millions of people with God's very life. We draw grace and strength from this food, which is good for this life and the life to come.

Lord, your heart is always filled with pity and compassion towards your people and you feed us every day with the Eucharist – the Bread of Heaven.

1 Kings 3:4-13 • Psalm 118(119):9-14

Mark 6:30-34

Sunday 7 February

(C) Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Luke 5:1-11

When the Church crossed the threshold of the millennium a new stage of the Church's journey began. At the heart of this new adventure was the new evangelization – a fresh, new and dynamic desire to 'put out into the deep', *duc in altum* (v. 4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words and cast their nets, and 'When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break' (v. 6 NIV). These words, *duc in altum*, 'put out into the deep', still ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, live the present with enthusiasm and look forward to the future with confidence because 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb. 13:8).

The invitation to 'put out into the deep' is primarily one of evangelization, of winning souls for Christ. Jesus is the goal of history and the one Saviour of the world. The Church and the Spirit cry out in unity: 'Maranatha – come, Lord Jesus' (cf. Rev. 22:17). Jesus is also the goal and purpose of our lives, and the litmus test of faith is always: do you know Jesus Christ our Lord? For in knowing and loving him we become strengthened in grace and love to share this blessing with others.

We are called not to be afraid but to be fishers of men and women. We are called to understand the deep desires and longings of every human heart – but in order to do that, we must first understand our own. We thirst to know the Living God. We cry out to know God's mercy and forgiveness in such a way that deep joy and happiness well up within. The Spirit is the One who quenches thirst and brings new life (John 4:14). This is the merciful love of the Father which was made known in Christ. When we come to touch the goodness, kindness and compassion of God our hearts sing out: 'O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever' (Ps. 118:1). We are ambassadors of God's mercy, channels of his love, witnesses of his goodness and kindness.

Lord, fill my heart with a new confidence to win others over to the living love and mercy of God.

Isaiah 6:1-8 • Psalm 137(138):1-5, 7-8

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 • Luke 5:1-11

Monday 8 February

Mark 6:53-56

Mark 6 ends with these beautiful and powerful words: ‘people would...beg him to let them touch even the tassel of his garment, and everyone who touched it was healed’ (v. 56 International Standard Version). The enthusiasm of the crowds is at odds with the hardness of heart of the disciples (v. 52) and the antagonism and resentment of the Pharisees (see Mark 7). The attitude and disposition of the crowds captures perfectly how we approach God – as poor beggars, for this is what we are. From the greatest of us to the least, each of us stands before God as a beggar in dire need of his grace and mercy. When we know this, we approach God in humility, reverence and awe, knowing that there is nothing we can do for God but everything God can do for us. We cannot make ourselves righteous or holy through our own efforts, because even our efforts are the fruit of God’s mercy and grace.

The problem is that we don’t see ourselves as beggars. Because a beggar is someone who stands in the street with a cup, calling out for help. To put this in a biblical perspective, to be a beggar is to cry out to the Lord: ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.’ We tend to resist this because deep down many put their faith in that old adage ‘God helps those who help themselves’. The truth is that nothing could be further from the truth, because God helps precisely those who cannot help themselves. This is the meaning of grace.

Grace is lifting a beggar out of destitution and placing them in a mansion. Grace is always unmerited and undeserved; it is lavish, generous and beyond our wildest dreams. The crowds who flocked to touch even Jesus’ garments had an instinctual grasp of God’s grace – even the tassel on his cloak was enough for them. This understanding – a work of grace for sure – gives us a grasp of who we are before God and a glimpse of who God is. But rather than overwhelming and depressing us, it should make us rush with joy and confidence into God’s arms. Oscar Wilde once said: ‘We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking up to the stars.’

Heavenly Father, a humble and contrite spirit is what you desire in us – a heart which sincerely prays: ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’

1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13 • Psalm 131(132):6-10

Mark 6:53-56

Tuesday 9 February

Mark 7:1-13

On the eve of Lent, a season of mercy, our reading focuses our thoughts on the interior life. The Pharisees appeared more concerned about the external practice of faith than the interior disposition of their hearts. They had added many rules, regulations and restrictions which went over and above, far and beyond, the teaching of the Torah. These man-made rules made people harsh, judgemental and legalistic.

On this occasion the Pharisees became indignant when they observed that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands ceremonially. In no uncertain terms Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and decried an extreme tradition being practised called 'Corban' (meaning 'given to God'), which prioritized giving to the temple over and above caring for one's parents. In essence, Jesus challenged man-made rules over against the law of the Spirit. Without a shadow of a doubt Jesus is the enemy of legalism. By quoting from the prophet Isaiah he made it very clear what he thought about these man-made traditions: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules' (vv. 6-7, quoting Isa. 29:13 NIV).

Now before we get too down on the Pharisees it is important to see that we are not that different. We too pay lip-service to many of the practices of our faith. In other words we may go through the motions but our hearts are lukewarm or, worse, cold to the love of God. We can honour God with our lips when we are at Mass and receiving the Eucharist but our hearts and minds can be miles away. We can pay lip-service to not gossiping, or giving into resentment or hatred, but deep down we know we fuel gossip and nurse resentment in our hearts.

The only remedy to a cold heart is to have it warmed in the fire of repentance and conversion. The good news is that we are about to enter into the season for repentance and conversion. Jesus loved the Pharisees and he loves us too. Lent is a time to hold our hands up, confess our sins, renounce our evil ways and throw ourselves upon the healing mercy and love of God.

Lord, I commit myself this Lent to a journey of renewal and change so that I may know in a real and living way the joy of repentance and conversion.

1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30 • Psalm 83(84):3-5, 10, 11

Mark 7:1-13

Wednesday 10 February

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 • Ash Wednesday

Lent is a time of repentance, conversion, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and self-denial. It is also a time of renewal, retreat, refreshment and revival when we rediscover anew and afresh the compassion and kindness of God, who so loved the world that he sent his only Son (John 3:16).

Our word 'Lent' comes from the Old English word *lencten* meaning 'springtime'. In her cookery and housekeeping classic on household management, Mrs Beeton wrote, 'Spring is the usual period for housecleansing and removing the dust and dirt which accumulates during the winter months from dust, smoke and gas.' The season of Lent can be understood in the same light. It is a time, by God's grace, to remove the dust and dirt of sin which accumulates through the nitty-gritty, daily grind of life. And as any man or woman who is good at housework will tell you, a good spring-clean requires planning, perseverance and, frankly, hard work!

We take heart from the wisdom of St John Chrysostom who speaks to us across the centuries: 'When the fast makes its appearance, like a kind of spiritual springtime, let us as soldiers burnish our weapons, and as harvesters sharpen our sickles, and as sailors order our thoughts against the waves of extravagant desires, and as travellers set out on the journey towards heaven, and as wrestlers strip for the contest. For the believer is at once a harvester, a sailor, a soldier, a wrestler and a traveller.'

Today, the ashes on our forehead are a public sign of our commitment to enter the desert of Lent in order to enjoy the fruit, banquet and blessing of the Easter dawn. We gird our loins and lower our heads to receive the blessing of God, who invites us to enter into the mystery of the cross, the perfect revelation of his mercy and love. God's mercy is greater than his justice and his mercy is poured out upon us like the fresh falling dew. God's mercy renews us in faith and creates in us a new and joyful confidence in his goodness, for he sees what is done in secret and rewards us with every spiritual blessing. The blessing of Lent is to come to a new and fresh understanding, a grace of revelation, which takes us right into the Merciful Heart of the Father.

Father in heaven, may this season of repentance bring us the blessing of your forgiveness and the gift of your light.

Joel 2:12-18 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Thursday 11 February

Thursday after Ash Wednesday or, Our Lady of Lourdes • Luke 9:22-25

Bishop Fulton Sheen, like many great preachers, had a way with words. He said: 'There are only two philosophies of life: one is first the feast and then the headache; the other is first the fast and then the feast. Deferred joys purchased by sacrifice are always the sweetest.'

It is traditional to say what we are giving up for Lent. Often, ironically, it is sweets or chocolate or sugar or alcohol or tobacco. The accent is very much on self-denial, penance and abstinence. This is only good and proper and, indeed, since its inception Lent has been a penitential season, a time to examine our lives, deny ourselves and prepare for our forty-day sojourn in the desert. It is as if the Church goes on a retreat during which we are invited to examine our lives, repent of our sin and return to the Lord our God.

The Spirit is, however, always urging and prompting us to step out of our comfort zone, take a risk, and resist the stagnation and aridity which result from a certain uncreative mindset. That mindset consents to self-denial but without love in our heart. It agrees to pray, fast and give alms without a deep sense of gratitude to God for the gift of mercy and forgiveness we have received. It goes through the motions and pays lip-service but is tainted with the whiff of duplicity and hypocrisy because deep life-changing repentance is not truly lived or embraced.

Reflect on the light the Catechism of the Catholic Church sheds on what it means to truly die to ourselves through the gift of repentance and conversion: 'The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and varied ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms: fasting, prayer and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God and to others. Alongside the radical purification brought about by baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: efforts at reconciliation with one's neighbour, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbour, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity, which covers a multitude of sins' (para. 1434).

Lord, today I take up my cross and carry it with joy and courage during the holy season of Lent. I reject the shallow values of the world and understand that to gain the whole world and lose my soul would profit me nothing.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Luke 9:22-25

Friday 12 February

Matthew 9:14-15 • Friday after Ash Wednesday

The prophet Ezra declared, 'I proclaimed a fast there...that we might humble ourselves before our God' (Ezra 8:21). The true intention of fasting is to humble us, but ironically it can have the opposite effect: it can create a certain arrogance or aloofness. Even John the Baptist's disciples were not immune from this weakness, as can be seen in today's incident in which they align themselves with the Pharisees against the Lord's disciples, asking: 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' (v. 14).

Jesus responds to this petulant question with a question. Rather like a good turn, one question deserves another! Jesus compares his presence among them to that of a bridegroom at a wedding – and who fasts at a wedding? He goes on to acknowledge that a time would come when his followers would fast, and fasting has indeed been part of the Christian tradition from the very beginning. In fact, fasting as an ascetical practice is embedded in the Old Testament. Moses fasted before receiving the tablets of the Law (cf. Exod. 34:28) and Elijah fasted before meeting the Lord on Mount Horeb (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:8).

Jesus taught that true fasting is doing the will of the Heavenly Father, who 'sees in secret' and 'will reward you' (Matt. 6:18). We see this when Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days and forty nights. He set us the example of what our attitude to fasting should be. Fasting highlights that 'man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matt. 4:4). The true fast is thus directed to eating the 'true food', which is to do the Father's will (cf. John 4:34).

Fasting humbles us; it puts us in touch with our dependence upon God and our need for his grace and strength. True fasting also puts us in touch with our sinfulness and selfish desires, leading us to turn to the Lord in humble repentance. Fasting purifies and refreshes our spirits; it casts pride and arrogance down because we realize we are dependent upon God.

'Fasting is the soul of prayer, mercy is the lifeblood of fasting. So if you pray, fast; if you fast, show mercy; if you want your petition to be heard, hear the petition of others. If you do not close your ear to others, you open God's ear to yourself.' (St Peter Chrysologus)

Isaiah 58:1-9 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 18-19

Matthew 9:14-15

Saturday 13 February

Saturday after Ash Wednesday • Luke 5:27-32

Two men are talking about the Christian faith. One of them says, 'I don't believe in all that mumbo jumbo you believe in, and anyway the Church is full of hypocrites.'

Quick as a flash the other man, a believer, said: 'That shouldn't stop you believing, you know – one more won't make much difference.' He meant, of course, that the Church is full of hypocrites because the Church is full of sinners. Guess what: the Church isn't full of the righteous but of the unrighteous who have been made righteous. Since time immemorial there has been a division between those who consider themselves righteous and those who do not. Jesus transformed our understanding by, well, turning this idea on its head.

This is beautifully illustrated in the calling of Levi, which has a special place in Pope Francis' heart. When he was made a bishop, Fr Bergoglio chose as his episcopal motto: 'Miserando atque eligendo', and literally in Latin 'by having mercy, by choosing him'. Now as Pope he has retained it as his pontifical motto. It is taken from homilies of the Venerable Bede on St Matthew's Gospel: 'Jesus saw the tax collector and by having mercy chose him as an apostle saying to him: "Follow me."' It was on the feast of St Matthew in 1953 that Jorge Bergoglio was touched by the mercy of God in a unique and special way and knew then that God was calling him to enter the religious life.

Pope Francis is leading the Church to see itself as an island of mercy and ourselves first and foremost as sinners, beggars, if you like, before the throne of God's mercy. We tend to get down or slightly depressed when we come in touch with our sinfulness and weaknesses but actually this is a reason to rejoice. 'Why,' you ask, 'would I rejoice in being a sinner?' Because Christ came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Christ did not come to seek and save the righteous because no one is righteous – we have all sinned. We are all beggars in the gutter looking up at the light of Christ, who bends down to pick us up and restore us as children of the Father.

Lord, lead me to rejoice in being a fallen yet redeemed sinner, and grant me a heart soft and warm towards all who stray far from you.

Isaiah 58:9-14 • Psalm 85(86):1-6

Luke 5:27-32

Sunday 14 February

Luke 4:1-13 • First Sunday of Lent (C)

Each year on the First Sunday of Lent the Church invites us to reflect on the story of Jesus' temptations. The Holy Spirit led him out into the desert to be tempted and he leads us there also. In his temptations Jesus took the fight to Satan himself. He was like a warrior, fully armed, fully prepared to do combat with the enemy. The purpose of each temptation was to lure Jesus away from the way of the cross to take the easy way, the softer path. Jesus turned to the Word of God, the Scriptures, to deflect Satan's lies.

Satan sought to lead Jesus away from God's plan with three core temptations: the temptation to provide for his own very real physical needs by turning stones into bread; the temptation to reveal his true identity through the shallow and spectacular display of miraculous power – by throwing himself off the highest point of the temple; the temptation to acquire power and domination simply with one act or gesture in worship of the lord of darkness.

Jesus rejects all these temptations and reaffirms his firm intention to follow the path established by the Father, without any compromise with sin or the logic of the world. Jesus doesn't dialogue with Satan, as Eve did in paradise. Instead, Jesus chooses to take refuge in the Word of God and to respond with the power of that Word. Satan is too powerful for us to argue with him, but we, like the Lord, defend and protect ourselves with the Word of God (v. 4; cf. Deut. 8:3). This is what gives us strength and sustains us in our fight against evil.

We know that the road of faith passes through times of darkness and doubt, and is nourished by patience and persevering expectation. When Satan tests us we need to respond as Jesus did, countering his claims with the truth of God's Word. In Ephesians Paul tells us to equip ourselves with 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (6:17). Jesus described Satan as 'a liar and the father of lies' (John 8:44), and the only way to counter those lies is with the liberating truth of God's Word. As we do so, we will find strength to walk the path of God and arrive at Easter in the joy of the Holy Spirit.

'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...' (John 16:13)

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 • Psalm 90(91):1-2, 10-15

Romans 10:8-13 • Luke 4:1-13

Monday 14 March

Lenten Weekday • John 8:12-20

Under the Torah (the Jewish law) for a testimony to be valid two witnesses were required (Deut. 17:6). Jesus believed his testimony about himself was validated by his own witness and that of the Father. Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees essentially revolved around his testimony and his authority: he testified that he knew the Father and he claimed to have authority to forgive sin. Now, if we cut the Pharisees a little bit of slack, their desire to probe into Jesus' testimony and authority was not unreasonable. Nevertheless, they were not sincere and genuine in their enquiry, which was largely motivated by the fact that they saw Jesus as a major threat to their way of life and, more importantly, their authority.

Plenty of human beings in history have claimed a special relationship with God and indeed have even claimed they are the Messiah – not many, however, have said they can forgive sin. With piercing insight C.S. Lewis noted: 'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic...or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.' When we make this choice we are in effect choosing to live in the light or to be overwhelmed by the darkness.

Jesus is the Light of the World. We are called to testify to this light and to share our experience that we know where we are from and we know where we are going. For in Christ Jesus we are born again through baptism and are a new creation – this is where we are from. We know where we are going because we are on a pilgrimage back to the Father's house.

It is the fruit of the Spirit in our lives which bears eloquent testimony that we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ. We have received joy, we witness to joy; we have received mercy, we witness to mercy; we have received forgiveness, we witness to God's forgiveness. We have received a clarity and conviction that we have touched the meaning of existence – our dignity and destiny – which is to live and walk and move as children of the Father, redeemed by the Son, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Lord, teach me to walk in your divine light.

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 • Psalm 22(23)

John 8:12-20

Monday 15 February

Lenten Weekday • Matthew 25:31-46

There is no dress rehearsal for living, nor is there a blueprint. Our lives aren't theoretical: they are lived out in the daily grind with all its ups and downs, ebbs and flows, good days and bad. In the midst of this cauldron of life we are called to put into practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Today's Gospel reading makes it abundantly clear that through our service of others we are literally ministering to Christ Jesus our Lord.

But that's the hard part, isn't it? We don't tend to see Christ in the person we don't like, or the one who irritates us, or even the one who has actively and deliberately hurt, wounded or offended us. It is very hard – some would say impossible – to love those we think unlovable. We may find them unlovable, but God does not. And that's the point, isn't it – we need to think the way God thinks and resist the way we think. The bottom line is: in order to be merciful, we need to draw near to God and experience his mercy in a real and visceral way.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: 'Jesus has made himself the Bread of life to give us life. Night and day, he is there. If you really want to grow in love, come back to the Eucharist, come back to that Adoration.' This Lent spend time in prayer and you will know God's mercy. This Lent read the Scriptures, especially the parable of Mercy (Luke 15), and, if you can, spend time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament.

'People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway. What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway. Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.' (Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15
Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday 16 February

Matthew 6:7-15 • Lenten Weekday

In St John's Gospel, Jesus revealed himself to us through a number of declarations: 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11); 'I am the light of the world' (8:12); 'I am the bread of life' (6:35). These are well known and often quoted. But Jesus also declared, 'I am the gate' (10:9 NIV) and promised that 'anyone who enters through me will be safe' (10:9). God keeps us safe as we draw near to the Father's heart.

Whenever we pray the Our Father, we are drawing near to the Father's heart. The Our Father reveals the Father's merciful heart and is really a summary of the gospel message – it is the perfect prayer for people who have received God's mercy. As Peter says, 'Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy' (1 Pet. 2:10).

Right at the heart of the Our Father we find the petition for forgiveness: we ask for God's forgiveness and we confirm our willingness to forgive others. This is kingdom logic: we receive mercy, we show mercy. However, as C S Lewis observed, 'Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until we have someone to forgive.' When we pray the Our Father we are softening our heart to learn the art of forgiveness and mercy. We forgive and show mercy more readily the more we understand how quickly God forgives us. We seek God's forgiveness whenever we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. In the encounter of confession we come in direct contact with the saving mercy of the Father, and the more we receive this grace, the more easily we forgive others.

Forgiveness doesn't have to be an impossible thing, although it is always challenging because it invites us to be self-knowing and self-aware – truly difficult things. However, when we pray the Our Father, the supreme prayer, God, we are helped by God to forgive our enemies and indeed our friends, deeply and from the heart. This might seem impossible, but what is impossible for us is possible for God. The Spirit helps us to let go of all our hurts and wounds and indeed he is the One who heals us.

Lord, by the grace of my baptism I renounce anger and resentment and turn to you for the strength to forgive in the spirit of the Our Father.

Isaiah 55:10-11 • Psalm 33(34):4-7, 16-19

Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday 17 February

Lenten Weekday • Luke 11:29-32

Jesus was a faithful Jew, steeped in the Torah, the Psalms and the Prophets. God's Spirit blows where he wills and Jesus recognized the work of God in all men and women – Jew or Gentile. The fact that Jesus was a Jew did not make him narrow, blinkered or partisan, like the scribes and Pharisees who were clearly threatened by him and his spiritual authority. Ultimately, Jesus' conflict with them was about authority – by whose authority he acted and in whose name he spoke.

In the story of the prophet Jonah, who was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, Jesus identified a deeper spiritual truth – his own death and resurrection, for he would spend three days and three nights in the belly of death. This he referred to as 'the sign of Jonah' (v. 29). The other person to whom Jesus referred, the Queen of Sheba, undertook a long and arduous journey to investigate the rumours she had heard about the wisdom of King Solomon (see 1 Kgs. 10:1-13). The Spirit was working powerfully in both the life of this Gentile Queen and the pagan people to whom Jonah was sent.

God's Spirit is at work in believer and unbeliever, in the righteous and the unrighteous, leading us all to repentance and conversion. There are people of good will everywhere who have sensibilities which make them open and responsive to hearing echoes of the gospel, if not the full gospel message. God is working in their lives, preparing them to hear the message of life – our task is to be sincere and genuine witnesses of faith. Lent can be a season not just of repentance and conversion but of witness and evangelization because the world hungers and thirsts for the gospel of life.

Whom will God send? Our call is always to be prepared to give witness to why we have hope and how our faith gives us strength, comfort and consolation. People often say they aren't religious because they don't need a crutch – they rely on their own strength and abilities and not on God. We are not ashamed to say that we hunger and thirst for the Living God.

My soul thirsts for you, O Lord, like a dry and weary land: you are the God whom I seek. With the help of your grace and strength may I be an authentic witness of your love and mercy.

Jonah 3:1-10 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 12-13, 18-19
Luke 11:29-32

Thursday 18 February

Matthew 7:7-12 • Lenten Weekday

Ask, seek, knock: three key words in understanding our relationship with God. Jesus transformed the way we approach God: no longer in fear and dread but as children, confident, hopeful and expectant of receiving good things from our Good Creator, God the Father. Sounds too good to be true?

Well, actually it isn't – we can rely on it – but here's the challenge we face. Our problem isn't God, it's ourselves. Often we don't ask, seek or knock because we aren't confident, hopeful or expectant. We diminish God's goodness, kindness and generosity because of the way we think about the important question: who is God? How we understand and answer this question says a lot about us and our relationship with the Father.

We can have an image of God in our minds which does him a profound disservice and falls short of not only his glory and majesty but also his goodness, kindness and compassion. Jesus' teaching is clear: God the Father delights to give his children good things. God the Father is generous and lavish in blessing his children. However, there is a catch. Well, it's not really a catch, nor is it really a condition: it's more the fruit of a relationship underpinned by respect and dignity. We need to want, seek and desire God's blessing and grace. In other words we need to ask, seek and knock!

Each of these words is a verb, and verbs, as we all know, are doing words. God created us without us but does not save us without us. We have to seek the Lord; we have to thirst for him, as, indeed, he thirsts for us. We need to humble ourselves and seek not to be self-reliant but reliant on God. But what do we ask, seek and knock for? Most of all we ask, seek and knock for the wisdom and light of God. God has already given us every spiritual blessing but they can lie dormant in us. If we ask, seek and knock, he will re-ignite these blessings – his deep and lasting joy in our heart, a burning love for the gospel – so that we in turn are able to reach out and bless those we meet in the course of our day-to-day lives.

Lord, source of every grace and blessing, teach me to do unto others what I would have them do unto me – that is to love, serve and show mercy.

Esther 4:17 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 7-8

Matthew 7:7-12

Friday 19 February

Lenten Weekday • Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus' teaching on anger is radical and life-changing – if we practised it, it would change our lives! For the truth is that many today are angry. We have road rage, air rage and phone rage – we are without a shadow of a doubt angry people.

Jesus was familiar with the Old Testament teaching on anger. The book of Proverbs has much to say on anger – for example, 'A quick-tempered man does foolish things' (14:17 NIV); 'He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly' (14:29 NIV); and 'Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city' (16:32 NIV).

The New Testament, too, has sage words on anger. James counsels the believers in Jerusalem, 'Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires' (Jas. 1:19-20 NIV). Paul taught that we should address anger quickly: 'Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger' (Eph. 4:26).

Jesus' own teaching on this subject is completely radical and shocking because he equates anger with the crime of murder. Of course, on one level we understand the close connection between anger and murder because a murderer is often motivated by passion and rage or burning resentment. However, it's one thing to be angry with someone, but a completely different thing to murder them – or is it?

It is very telling that the word 'anger' is one letter short of another word 'danger', and when we are angry a red light should go on – a danger or anger warning because our souls and spirits are at risk of being damaged. The thing about anger is that it is the angry person who gets wounded most. Anger is a kind of self-violence, a self-inflicted wound which can often fester within us.

How do we deal with the anger in our lives? The angry man or woman has lost sight of the mercy of God – they have not grasped that they are forgiven sinners who have received the mercy of God. Only when we truly receive that mercy are we able to sincerely extend it to those who wrong us.

Lord, set me free from the frenzy and fever of anger and heal me with the balm of your mercy, the forgiveness of your grace and the assurance of your love.

Ezekiel 18:21-28 • Psalm 129(130) • Matthew 5:20-26

Saturday 20 February

Matthew 5:43-48 • Lenten Weekday

Perfection is a big ask, but this is what Jesus demands of us (Matt. 5:48). And just to be clear, this isn't just by a human standard of perfection: this is as perfect as God himself! Big ask? Tall order? Impossible? Yes, it is a big ask, it is a tall order and, frankly, yes, it is impossible. As human beings we are frail, fallen, weak and sensual, and deep in our nature we are drawn not to what is good but to what is evil. It isn't looking good, is it?

Jesus' punchline (for, indeed, it does pack a punch) comes at the end of a teaching about love and especially loving one's enemies. Loving our friends is hard enough: loving our enemies is a totally different proposition, don't you think? To put that in some perspective, it means loving a person who loathes and despises you, and even actively seeks your destruction. It seems insane, illogical and frankly ridiculous. The problem, though, is that this is precisely what Jesus taught. It is the moral and ethical teaching of the gospel, the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the essence of the Beatitudes. We are called to live a life of love. The New Testament uses the Greek word *agape* for this type of love. This quality of love is self-sacrificing and seeks no reward for itself. This quality of love is not human: it's divine. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. And we grow in this quality of love only as we become more like Jesus.

So you see, we are invited to perfection, we are invited to love, even our enemies, but not by our own strength, by our own ability or in our own nature. Our perfection then is not our own – it is God's. The Year of Mercy is a favourable time to step up and love as we have never loved before, to be merciful as we have never been merciful before, and to forgive as we have never forgiven before. In short, the Year of Mercy is a favourable time to renew our search for holiness or, to put it another way, to explore and experiment with being holy. Because holiness and perfection simply mean imitating Christ.

Lord, teach me to be an imitator of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, and in doing so seek to be holy as God is holy.

Deuteronomy 26:16-19 • Psalm 118(119):1-8

Matthew 5:43-48

Sunday 21 February

(C) Second Sunday of Lent • Luke 9:28-36

Just before Jesus began his public ministry he was baptized; just before Jesus entered his Passover he was transfigured. At both events the Father, the Son and the Spirit were revealed. St Thomas Aquinas said of the Transfiguration: ‘We behold the Father in the voice, the Son in the man Jesus and the Spirit in the shining cloud’. The secret kept hidden for centuries and finally revealed was that the God of Israel is Three Persons in One God: God is Trinity.

When we come to know God, we come to know God as our Father, the Son as our Saviour and the Spirit as our Counsellor. The central mystery of our faith is that God is Trinity, and a golden key of our faith is, if you like, to see every teaching of the Church and every Scripture in the light and context of the Blessed Trinity. We are baptized into God who is Trinity; we are immersed into the death and resurrection of the Son of God, who is Trinity; and we are transfigured by God’s grace, in this life and in the life to come, in the Trinity.

We are a people of the Trinity and, in this Year of Mercy, we come to know the mercy of the Father, the compassion of the Son and the forgiveness of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of God as Trinity took place in Israel over a long period – but in the fullness of time Jesus, born of a woman, revealed that he was God’s only begotten Son, true God and true man. Our faith is an invitation to worship each member of the Trinity, and in our worship we are transfigured and partake in the divine nature. Many of the saints radiate the life and joy of the gospel which is the radiance of God – the light of the Blessed Trinity.

The Trinity is a mystery, for sure, but one that by God’s grace we can penetrate and enter into. We cannot enter into the Trinity by reason alone: reason lends a helping hand but a knowledge and understanding that God is Three in One is the fruit of a grace of revelation. We pray especially for this grace during this Year of Mercy.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 • Psalm 26(27):1, 7-9, 13-14
Philippians 3:17-4:1 • Luke 9:28-36

Monday 22 February

Matthew 16:13-19 • Chair of St Peter (Feast)

Today we celebrate the ancient feast of the Chair of St Peter, which began in the fourth century, giving thanks on this holy day for the mission God entrusted to the Apostle Peter and his successors. The word cathedral literally means ‘the seat of the bishop placed in the mother church of a diocese’. It is a symbol of the bishop’s teaching authority, which as a successor of the Apostles he is called to safeguard and transmit. It is from this seat that the bishop guides the souls entrusted to him on their journey of faith, hope and charity back to the Father’s house.

The first chair of St Peter was in the Upper Room, where it is likely that a special place was reserved for the fisherman-turned-apostle. Subsequently, the chair of St Peter was in Antioch. From Antioch the apostle went to Rome, the epicentre of the Roman Empire, and it was there that he ended his race at the service of the gospel and martyrdom. St Irenaeus described the Church of Rome as the ‘greatest and most ancient, known by all...founded and established in Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul.’ Tertullian said later: ‘How blessed is the Church of Rome, on which the Apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood!’

The papacy represents an unbroken line of succession, guided and protected by the Holy Spirit, beginning with St Peter and leading up to Pope Francis today. St Jerome expressed well the significance of the Chair of St Peter, saying: ‘I decided to consult the Chair of Peter, where that faith is found exalted by the lips of an Apostle; I now come to ask for nourishment for my soul there, where once I received the garment of Christ. I follow no leader save Christ, so I enter into communion with your beatitude, that is, with the Chair of Peter, for this I know is the rock upon which the Church is built.’

In the apse of St Peter’s Basilica there is a monument to the chair of the apostle created by Bernini. It is in the form of a great bronze throne supported by the statues of four Doctors of the Church: two from the West, St Augustine and St Ambrose, and two from the East, St John Chrysostom and St Athanasius.

Today we call upon the Holy Spirit, asking that he will always sustain the Pope’s daily service to the entire Church.

1 Peter 5:1-4 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 16:13-19

Tuesday 23 February

(Memorial) St Polycarp • Matthew 23:1-12

In 1824 the first Duke of Wellington declared brazenly about the threat of blackmail, 'Publish and be damned.' As Catholic publishers we are more in the business of 'Publish and be saved'! However, one thing is certain and that is in publishing it is hard to please all the people all the time – and thank God for that! Because writing reflections on the Scriptures invariably involves exploring challenging and difficult subject matter.

Take today's reading as an example: it is a scorcher, with damning woes and rebukes directed towards the religious elite of Jesus' day, who clearly abused their positions of power and authority. We endeavour to write fairly about the Pharisees because it is too easy to demonize them and there were certainly good men among them, e.g. Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night and clearly supported him before the Sanhedrin and Joseph of Arimathea who provided Jesus with a tomb. What we do know is that Jesus loved the Pharisees – and proved his love through his fraternal correction.

Some years ago we published a reflection in which we compared the Pharisees to the professional religious of our day, saying that a modern equivalent might be 'theologians and Jesuits'. One Jesuit who read this reflection complained bitterly, and the editor of Bible Alive was later contacted by the Provincial of the Jesuit order, who insisted on a written apology. How could Bible Alive possibly think that such a comparison was helpful? The editor pointed out that the source of the comparison was Fr Daniel Harrington, who had written, 'A modern Christian equivalent to the phrase "scribes and Pharisees" would be something like "theologians and Jesuits".' The Provincial retracted his demand for an apology because Fr Harrington is both a world-renowned Scripture scholar and a Jesuit!

Pope Francis, who is himself a Jesuit, often teaches on the dangers of clericalism – of seeking ecclesiastical power and prestige. However, a little self-knowledge teaches us that there is something of the Pharisees' attitude in us all. We are all guilty of parading our acts of righteousness for the world to see; we are all guilty of not practising what we preach. And because we are all guilty and all fall short of the glory of God, we heed the call to humble ourselves through repentance that we may be exalted through God's mercy and forgiveness.

Wednesday 24 February

Matthew 20:17-28 • Lenten Weekday

Pope John Paul was made a bishop when he was thirty-eight, becoming the youngest bishop in Poland. On learning he had been appointed to the episcopate he made a retreat. The rule at the retreat house was that the younger priests served the older ones. Bishop Wojtyla did not protest or object. Some weeks after the retreat the older priests realized whom they had been humbly served by and it made a deep impression on them all. The bishop who humbled himself was exalted by becoming Pope John Paul II, who surely one day will be called Pope John Paul the Great.

One of the delightful things about the Scriptures is the light they shed, warts and all, on the disciples. Jesus is approached by the mother of James and John, who is concerned for her sons' advancement. She wants pride of place for them and rather brazenly asks: 'Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom' (v. 21 NIV). Jesus put her down (and, we presume, them) gently, suggesting that she didn't really understand what she was asking. The Lord then used their naked exposure of selfish ambition to teach on true greatness: humility.

But what is humility? How humble are you? The truly humble take seriously the first question and laugh at the second. We can be tempted to think that humility is about low self-esteem or running ourselves down, but that isn't humility. Humility has more to do with having a sense of God's greatness and our fallenness, not in a way that crushes but in a way that puts the focus on God.

What truly keeps us humble is the gift of self-knowledge: an awareness of our faults, sins and weaknesses. Padre Pio said once, 'Humility and purity are the wings which carry us to God and make us almost divine. Remember that a bad man who is ashamed of the wrong things he is doing is nearer to God than a good man who blushes at the good he is doing.' The humble are not in the image of Uriah Heap ('I'm so 'umble') or the Pharisee ('I thank you, God, that I am not like other men') but rather can sincerely and from the heart pray:

Father, be merciful to me, for I have sinned against heaven and earth and am no longer worthy to be called your son/daughter.

Jeremiah 18:18-20 • Psalm 30(31):5-6, 14-16

Matthew 20:17-28

Thursday 25 February

Lenten Weekday • Luke 16:19-31

It is interesting that we know the name of the homeless man, Lazarus, but not the rich man's name. Isn't this the ultimate curse for the rich and famous who cherish their name more than anything else? The parable strikes a blow at this illusion – the poor man who had no dignity in life is given a name, while the rich man's name is lost. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is a study of the blessings of a man who trusts in the Lord versus the curse on the man who trusts in his own abilities.

Where do we place our trust? Do we trust in the Lord or do we trust in idols and our possessions? The parable holds out a door of hope even to those who have placed their total reliance on themselves, as Pope Francis explains:

When [the rich man] realizes that he has lost everything, even his name, he raises his eyes and speaks a single word: 'Father!' And God responds with one single word: 'Son!' Thus, for those who have placed their trust in man, in themselves, and who have lost their name and dignity, there still remains the possibility of speaking this word, which is far greater than magic, far greater and more powerful: 'Father!'. We know that he is always waiting for us, waiting to open a door that we do not see, and he will say to us: 'My child!'. (From a synopsis of the morning meditation, 20 March 2014)

May the Lord grant us all the wisdom to trust only in him and not in things or in human strength: only in him. We pray for all those who have lost this sense of trust in God that he might grant them at least the light to cry out to him, for he will surely open a door and enable them to hear his voice saying, 'My child.'

God loves everyone, rich or poor, and his mercy excludes no one. We pray for the poor, mindful that the Father has a preferential love for the poor, whose cry reaches up to heaven. We pray for the rich that they would receive the wisdom to share with the poor and destitute of the world, for in serving them we serve Christ.

Lord, teach me to see you in the hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the homeless and the destitute, for in serving them I serve you.

Jeremiah 17:5-10 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Luke 16:19-31

Friday 26 February

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46 • Lenten Weekday

Parables have layered meanings. We can plumb and mine their depth as the Spirit leads us, but be sure the Spirit always leads us deeper.

There is universal agreement that the parable of the Tenants can be understood in the following way: God is the owner of the vineyard who leased it to the religious and political leaders. The servants are the prophets who were treated badly and even killed when they went to collect what was rightfully due to their master. The owner of the vineyard (God the Father) sent his son (Christ) but those wicked servants killed him (on the cross). The owner (God) learnt of their murderous act and visited the vineyard. The parable doesn't tell us what the owner did with the tenants but simply asks the question: 'When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' (v. 40). This parable was spoken at a specific situation and time. Jesus, the cornerstone of Israel, the pivot of God's plan for Israel and the salvation of humankind, was rejected by his own people. On hearing the parable, the Pharisees quickly realized that Jesus was addressing them.

So how are we to understand this parable today? How does it reach into our world, our lives? One of the deeper layers we can explore is how God's plan of salvation always involves a choice which demands acceptance or rejection. God worked his plan of salvation – the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection – through his people Israel. Yet, in the fullness of time when this plan was revealed, it was rejected by them but embraced by the Gentiles. This is because salvation in Christ is for the entire human race – Christ died for everyone: Jew, Gentile, believer, unbeliever, those near to God and those far away.

Why Israel rejected Christ is a mystery, but the Jewish people are our elder brother in faith. God's call is irrevocable, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father (see Phil. 2:10-11). We pray for our Jewish brothers and sisters that the Spirit would lead them to see in Jesus of Nazareth the Suffering Servant and Servant King, the promised Messiah.

We join with the Spirit and the Bride in praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28 • Psalm 104(105):16-21

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Saturday 27 February

Lenten Weekday • Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son, which without doubt is the most well known of all Jesus' parables, could equally be called the parable of the Father's Merciful Heart. Its accent is on the Father's goodness and generosity rather than on the younger son's excesses or the elder son's spite and meanness. The Father's arms are wrapped right around the parable in loving and merciful embrace. Scholars, both believing and unbelieving, recognize it not just as a treasure of spiritual insight but as a literary jewel. We are invited to study it, pray about it, reflect on it and ask the Spirit to help us enter its mystery so that it will freely give up its secrets and riches.

Whom do you relate to in the parable? The younger son, the wastrel with his wanton and wasteful ways? The Father, with his generous and kind heart reaching out with compassion and forgiveness to his son, who was lost but is now found, was blind but now sees? What is for sure is that very few of us relate to the older brother. He is the villain of the piece, the anti-hero, a picture of spite and moral indignation, lacking in warmth and kindness towards his returning sibling.

However, a sobering truth we may wish to consider is that we may be more like the elder brother than we care to admit. The elder brother's heart had grown cold and complacent. He saw working for his father as 'slaving away' and regarded obedience as a duty not a joy. The shocking truth about the parable is that both sons were lost, but in different ways; both sons were extended the love and mercy of the father. The father expresses his love for the elder son rather movingly and beautifully: 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours' (v. 31).

God's mercy reaches out to every cold heart, every self-righteous individual, every prude who considers themselves more righteous than others, and everyone stuck in a cycle of dry legalism or trapped in the despair of cynicism. The bright sun of the Father's mercy falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, drawing us all near to bask in the warmth of his love, compassion and joy.

Lord, melt my hard heart, purify me from the stain of sin and clothe me in the robes of righteousness, holiness and the joy of forgiveness.

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 9-12

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Sunday 28 February

Luke 13:1-9 • Third Sunday of Lent (C)

There is no fun in fundamentalism. This darkened and destructive way of thinking was alive in Jesus' day as it is in our own. Fundamentalism sees no shadows or grey but thinks only in black and white. Its orthodoxy is a weapon with which it beats others, should they not fall in line with its world view.

In the classic strain of fundamentalism we encounter in today's reading a disaster is associated with punishment for sin. This is an ancient and modern disease and is even found in the book of Job, 'Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil...reap it. At the breath of God they perish...' (4:7-9 NIV).

In today's Gospel the construction accident at the Siloam reservoir at Jerusalem in which eighteen people died was attributed to their sin. This erroneous and misleading view still prevails today. For example, when the AIDS crisis broke out in the early 1980s people regarded it as the judgement of God. And in the aftermath of 9/11 it was suggested that this terrorist attack reflected in some way God's righteous judgement.

Jesus was adamant that this way of thinking was simply wrong: 'do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!' (vv. 4-5 NIV). When people die in tragic and awful ways it doesn't reflect God's judgement. These events do, however, remind us of two sober truths: first, that we all must die and, second, that now is the right time to change our lives, because after death we cannot repent and change – it is too late. Today is always the day for conversion and repentance.

Lent is the season of change, repentance and conversion, and a wonderful time to seek out God's healing and mercy in the sacrament of mercy, the sacrament of reconciliation. If you have not been for a while, take heart: God's mercy and forgiveness awaits you. If you receive the sacrament frequently, you are blessed because through it, with it and in it we touch the very mercy of God, who always leads us on the holy road of interior repentance and conversion.

Lord, you are my Shepherd and you lead me to humbly confess my sins and shed tears of contrition and repentance.

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 6-8, 11

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 • Luke 13:1-9

Monday 29 February

Lenten Weekday • Luke 4:24-30

When there was a great famine among the Israelites, it was a Sidonian widow (a Gentile) who was helped by Elijah. There were many leprous people in Israel but it was Naaman the Syrian, another Gentile, whom Elisha cured. God's ways are not our ways and no prophet is welcome in their own home town: these are universally accepted truths.

Jesus so infuriated the townsfolk of Nazareth that they were overcome with the desire to murder him by throwing him off a cliff. In what must be one of the most understated verses in the whole of Scripture, Luke records, 'But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way' (v. 30 NIV). True, Jesus' hour had not yet come but this incident highlights perfectly that Jesus was master of his own destiny. Quite how it is possible to walk through a baying mob intent on hurling you from a cliff is impossible to understand, but that's the point, isn't it? God's ways are not our ways.

One approach to reading the Scriptures which can yield a lot of fruit is to put yourself into the shoes of the bad guys – in this instance, the Nazarene crowd intent on killing Jesus. Our tendency is not to do this: we prefer to assume that we might have behaved differently – but really, would we? Jesus had challenged their thinking – his teaching had well and truly dislodged them from their comfort zone. They could not get their heads around him – wasn't he Joseph's son?

The people of Nazareth were being led to think differently about what was happening in front of their very eyes. We too need God's grace to discern the signs of where God is working in our lives and in the world around us – in other words, to discern the signs of the times. God is definitely working through the ministry of Pope Francis. He is leading a kind of revolution – in this year, a velvet revolution, a revolution of mercy. Through him we are being challenged to rethink, re-evaluate and rediscover God's gift of mercy. This always invites a change of direction, a new perspective and a renewal of our minds.

Lord, through baptism you have made me a priest, a prophet and a king. Teach me to be a prophet, responsive to the leading of your Spirit and open to letting go of my own thinking and putting on the mind of Christ.

2 Kings 5:1-15 • Psalm 41(42):2-3; 42(43):3-4

Luke 4:24-30